



Greenwich International Film Festival Features Movies With Strong CT Ties

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The Greenwich International Film Festival will hold its second annual event from Thursday to Sunday, June 9 to 12, in Greenwich and Stamford. This year's lineup has movies starring some of the biggest stars in the movie world today: Kristen Stewart, Woody Harrelson, Ellen Page, Paul Rudd, Michael Shannon, Liam Hemsworth.

However, Nutmeggers will likely have the most interest in the movies with strong ties to the state. These include the Connecticut premiere of the documentary "Newtown," a documentary about Connecticut native Norman Lear, and a 1994 documentary about Bonnie Jean Foreshaw, who was sent to prison after a 1986 Hartford killing and not released until 2013, after evidence surfaced that showed her public defender bungled her case.

'Nature Of The Beast'

Foreshaw was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to 45 years in prison after accidentally shooting and killing a pregnant woman on Albany Avenue on March 27, 1986, while trying to defend herself against a man who was threatening her. The man was using the pregnant woman, Joyce Amos, as a human shield. Foreshaw, who lived in Bloomfield, carried a gun to protect herself against her abusive husband.

Documentarian Ondi Timoner met Foreshaw in 1993, when Timoner was a student at Yale and making a film about women at York Correctional Institution in Niantic. Many prisoners who talked to Timoner, and even one corrections officer, spoke lovingly of Foreshaw.

"A lot of the women said this one woman was their spiritual mother, she changed their lives," Timoner said in a phone interview from her Los Angeles-area home.

Timoner was captivated by Foreshaw's warm demeanor and the story of her life and her crime. Later, Timoner made a second documentary, just about Foreshaw. That film, "The Nature of the Beast," chronicles the miscarriage of justice in Foreshaw's case. The movie also goes into detail about Foreshaw's abusive marriages and actions by authorities after Foreshaw's arrest that put her at a legal disadvantage.

"I interviewed the arresting officer. He admitted that he didn't give her a phone call or a meal," Timoner said. "She was put on Thorazine. She was assigned a public defender and then when she asked for a change it was denied."

Hartford law enforcement and legal authorities are interviewed in the film, including Evan Stark, an expert on domestic violence.

"There were racial stereotypes operating in this case. ... When a black woman comes into court the judge doesn't see someone who has worked all her life, who is an independent person, who has never used violence before," Stark says in the film.

"The Nature of the Beast" premiered on PBS in October 1994. Timoner was young and idealistic and assumed her broadcast would set Foreshaw free. That didn't happen.

"It didn't cause any kind of groundswell," Timoner said. "I was crushed."

Years went by. "I think Bonnie thought that I'd failed her and forgot about her, but I never did," Timoner said.

Then Timoner was contacted by journalist Andy Thibault, who spoke with Timoner about Foreshaw and got copies of Timoner's film. Thibault passed those copies out to state government officials and gathered evidence that helped to build Foreshaw's clemency case.

The most powerful piece of evidence Thibault found was a detailed 1989 memo from then-public defender Jon C. Blue, who tersely summed up the situation: "Ms. Foreshaw did not have a fair trial."

With an appeal based on this new evidence, Foreshaw was set free in November 2013 at the age of 66.

"On the day they let her out, I was there. I filmed the clemency hearing and went home with her and filmed that, too," Timoner said. "That was the happiest ending I didn't expect."

The film will be shown Friday, June 10, at 7 p.m. at Greenwich Library, 101 West Putnam Ave., Greenwich. Foreshaw, who lives in East Hartford now and has changed her last name to Cook, says that people still refer to her as Foreshaw. She said she will be seeing "The Nature of the Beast" for the first time at the Greenwich screening. Timoner said it is the film's first screening in Connecticut since its TV premiere in 1994. Timoner will speak after the film, alongside Foreshaw and Thibault.

'Norman Lear,' 'Newtown'

Another highlight is "Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You," a chronicle of the life and work of the TV comedy trailblazer who created "All in the Family," "Maude," "The Jeffersons" and "Good Times."

The film does not mention Hartford, even though Lear lived here as a teen and graduated from Weaver High School in 1940. Lear was born in New Haven.

In the film, he discusses his parents, who heavily influenced the creation of the "All in the Family" couple Archie and Edith Bunker.

Lear's father was sent to jail when Lear was 9, a situation his mother would never discuss with him.

"My father was about to take a plane to Tulsa. He was traveling on some kind of business. 'Monkey business,' said my mother, who sensed the men he had fallen in with were not to be trusted. 'Herman, I don't like this,' she told him," Lear says in the film. "But Herman, as always, knew better. 'Jeannette,' he screamed, the veins in his neck bulging, 'stifle!' And off he went. ... The next time I saw him he had a hat in front of his face and he was manacled to a detective and they were coming down the steps of the courthouse."

Lear wound up living with one uncle, then another, and finally with his grandparents. After high school, he went to New York, worked three jobs at Coney Island, and then segued into the TV business.

"Norman Lear" will be shown Thursday, June 9, at 10:30 a.m. at Greenwich Library.

The festival also will host the Connecticut premiere of "Newtown." Kim Snyder's doc features Msgr. Robert Weiss, of St. Rose of Lima Church; Mark Barden, Nicole Hockley and David and Francine Wheeler, the parents of slain children Daniel Barden, Dylan Hockley and Ben Wheeler; first responder Sgt. William Cario; and other Newtown residents discussing the tragedy of Dec. 14, 2012 and its aftermath. The film, which had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, will be shown Saturday, June 11, at 3 p.m. and Sunday, June 12, at 6 p.m. at Bow Tie Cinema Greenwich.

GREENWICH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL is June 9 to 12 in locations in Greenwich and Stamford. For a full lineup of movies and list of venues, details about panels and parties, and to buy tickets, visit greenwichfilm.org.